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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief overview of the purpose and process of establishing competency-based standards for college admissions in the state of Washington. The state's Higher Education Coordinating Board is required by law to establish minimum requirements for admission to Washington's public baccalaureate institutes. The current policy, adopted in 1987 and fully implemented in 1992, sets certain course requirements for students to define the minimum standards for college entrance. In 1993, a new approach was enacted into law that requires the state to develop a new approach centered on mastery of certain skills, demonstrated through a Certificate of Mastery. The Commission on Student Learning founded through the same legislation has established standards for what students know and should be able to do at certain points in their academic learning experience. Assessments that incorporate these learning requirements have been developed and piloted for grade 4 and are under development for grade 10. The competency-based admissions project has so far been a model of school-college cooperation. The competencies have been established for English, mathematics, world language, science, social studies, and art. Assessments will be developed that support these competencies, and reporting standards will be devised to reflect achievement. Once the standards, assessments, and reporting form are complete, they will be pilot tested in three restructured high schools. (SLD)

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COMPETENCY-BASED ADMISSIONS STANDARDS IN WASHINGTON: A STATUS REPORT

AERA Symposium, March 25, 1997

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper will provide a brief overview of the purpose and process of establishing competency-based standards for college admissions in the state of Washington.

Current Admissions Standards

The Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) is required by law to establish *minimum* requirements for admission to Washington's public baccalaureate institutions (RCW 28B.80.350). The current admissions policy was adopted by the HECB in 1987, phased in over time, and fully implemented for students entering fall term 1992. The policy describes minimum high school requirements in terms of years of study:

- Four years of English (at least three years each in composition and literature);
- Three years of mathematics including algebra, geometry, and advanced mathematics;
- Three years of social studies;
- Two years of the same foreign language, Native American language, or American Sign Language;
- Two years of science, including one year of a laboratory science;
- One year of fine or performing arts, or electives from any of the other required subjects.

These courses, combined with an Admissions Index that estimates an applicant's "probability of success," define the minimum standards for university entrance and provide direction for high school study. The index combines the more heavily weighted grade point average with standardized pre-college test scores (SAT or ACT). Institutions may raise their individual standards beyond HECB minimum levels to promote institutional match and student success.

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Education Reform

In 1993 a new approach to K-12 education was enacted into law. RCW 28A.630.883 outlines an education structure that no longer would rely on traditional Carnegie units (seat time) as the measure to determine completion of basic education. This action reflected a significant change from the way student achievement had been traditionally measured.

The law also established the Commission on Student Learning to perform the following duties:

1) identify knowledge and skills all public school students need to know and be able to do;
2) develop a student assessment and accountability system;
3) develop a Certificate of Mastery (CoM) as part of the new assessment system;
4) take steps necessary to develop a performance-based education system, and;
5) develop recommendations for consideration by the HECB for adopting college entrance requirements that are consistent with the essential learning requirements and Certificate of Mastery.

This final directive intersects with HECB statutory authority to establish minimum admissions standards and presents an opportunity for higher education to take a leadership role in addressing K-12 educational reform.

The Certificate of Mastery (CoM) that results from the work of the Commission is intended to be earned by most students around the age of sixteen, although some students are expected to do so both earlier and later. The CoM is envisioned to convey a consistent mastery of basic skills, and to certify that the student is ready for specific technical/vocational training, apprenticeship, further academic study, or some combination of the three. In this state, it has not been finally determined what relationship the CoM will have to high school graduation or what else may be required for the diploma. There is no second level of advanced mastery.

A few influential advocates would like to see the CoM as the only requirement for the diploma, as well as for college admission. For a variety of reasons, this has not been a popular position among most constituents, but it is intriguing to those who see its potential for financial savings to both the state and the student.

Building on the Work of the Commission on Student Learning

The Commission on Student Learning has established standards for what students should know and be able to do at certain points in their K-12 experience. These standards are called **Essential Academic Learning Requirements**. The proposed competency-based admissions standards have been created by using and, as necessary, adding onto the essential academic learning requirements.

The commission has divided the essential academic learning requirements into two groups.

- Goal I: reading, writing, and communication;
- Goal II: mathematics, science, social science, art, and health and fitness.

The essential academic learning requirements have been approved for both Goal I and Goal II. However, specific details of the subject areas of science, social science, and the arts are still being evaluated. In other words, Goal I essential academic learning requirements, and mathematics from Goal II have been approved by the Commission. Work is not yet completed on the remainder of Goal II.

Assessments have been developed and piloted for the fourth grade level, developed for the seventh grade (piloting this spring) and are under development (piloting during '97-'98) for the tenth grade (CoM level). Statewide assessments for the Certificate of Mastery will be in place by 2000 for at least Goal I and mathematics.

REASONS FOR COMPETENCY-BASED ADMISSIONS STANDARDS

There are a number of reasons for Washington becoming involved with competency-based standards right now. K-12 reform is intended to raise the standards for all students and, in order to do that, to encourage a new approach to education. The current admissions standards will inhibit change if schools and parents are fearful that their students will not have transcripts that reflect the course patterns and grading required by colleges. Higher education in Washington does not want to be a barrier to K-12 reform.

One aspect of reform is the goal to have multiple pathways available for high school students that will lead them to a variety of career directions. If this approach is not to result in newer forms of tracking, students need to be able to move among pathways with some degree of ease. Carnegie unit/grades systems generally require college preparatory students to take specific courses (and to avoid others). A competency-based admissions system is able to recognize competencies achieved in any setting – even including work or independent study.

Remedial education currently absorbs too much of the resources of both students and the state. While Washington does not have a high proportion of students enrolled in remedial education compared to many states, it is apparent that the current standards fail students in two ways:

1. The standards do not adequately convey to students what they need to know and in order to arrive at college ready to tackle college level work; and
2. The standards do not adequately allow colleges to identify applicants who are ready for college work.

The legislature is concerned about the waste of resources represented by remedial education and has asked the HECB to address the issue. A competency-based admissions system has the potential to remedy both of these difficulties, thereby reducing the need for remedial education.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Admissions Standards Action Committee (ASAC)

The Higher Education Coordinating Board, with the support of the State Board of Education, convened the Admissions Standards Action Committee (ASAC) in 1995. The Committee was charged to complete the following tasks:

- examine the standards under which students gain entrance into a public baccalaureate institution and translate them into competency-based standards;
- identify how those translated standards will be measured and reported; and
- facilitate a smooth transition to higher education for students.

Since 1995, the Committee has met 12 times. Early meetings focused on defining the purpose of the committee and developing common goals. The committee determined early on that it would 1) build on the work of the Commission on Student Learning, 2) utilize material from other states and national standards, and 3) translate the existing standards rather than beginning from scratch.

Later meetings were dedicated to the task of reviewing the current core courses in terms of competencies. In addition, the ASAC has convened seven meetings of secondary and post-secondary faculty for the purpose of interpreting core course equivalencies by discipline. Additional faculty meetings are planned.

Partnerships with K-12

The competency-based admissions project has been a model of school-college cooperation. As a result of this project, presidents of the six public baccalaureate institutions and the executive director of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges issued a statement of support welcoming applicants from restructured schools.

The committee also has exchanged statements of support for each others' standards with the state of Oregon and with Stanford University. Additional statements are being negotiated with other state systems.

The ASAC is recommending that the Certificate of Mastery be the foundation on which admissions standards are built. Other states that are developing competency-based admissions standards have not generally tied them so closely to certificates of mastery. However, in order to move toward a more coherent, seamless system in this state, the minimum competency-based admissions standards have intentionally been tied to the commission's work.

COMPETENCY-BASED ADMISSIONS STANDARDS

Competency-based admissions standards are intended to replace traditional HECB minimum admissions standards (grade point average and Carnegie units) for Washington State high school graduates who have completed a Certificate of Mastery and who are applying to a public baccalaureate institution. Although the Certificate of Mastery is the foundation on which admissions standards are built, additional minimum admissions standards are needed in order to match the current standards.

The committee recognized that many different educational systems can prepare students for college. High school graduates who will be applying from schools in transition, from private high schools, or from schools outside the state may have traditional transcripts that will continue to be evaluated with the current HECB minimum admissions standards.

Defining Minimum Competency-based Equivalencies of Time-based Requirements

The ASAC has divided the traditional core-course subject areas used for college admissions purposes into two groups, based on the current status of comparable disciplines in the commission's work. High school teachers and faculty members from the public and private baccalaureate institutions and community colleges have been central to the process of translating current standards into competencies.

Group I– English, mathematics, and world language

The Admissions Standards Action Committee has completed the translation of current core-course admissions standards into competency-based equivalencies for these three subjects. English competencies are built on a compilation of the work of the Commission on Student Learning in reading, writing, and communication (Goal I from the K-12 statute). Mathematics competencies are built on the work of the commission in mathematics (part of Goal II).

World language competencies were created independently because a world language requirement is not included in the Certificate of Mastery. The world language equivalencies recommended in this report have been drafted by world language faculty and high school teachers as a translation of the current requirement.

***Group II* – science, social studies, and art**

This group of subjects corresponds with the rest of the areas covered by the Commission on Student Learning's Goal II. However, it does not include the Goal II health and fitness essential academic learning requirement, since there is not a corresponding admissions requirement.

The Commission on Student Learning is still evaluating recommendations about what all students should know and be able to demonstrate in science, social studies, and the arts for the CoM. There is concern in the K-12 community that the benchmarks in science and social studies may exceed what is currently being asked of all high school seniors and that all sophomores would not be able to reach that level.

The outcome of the commission's work in the next few months will determine whether we will need to reconvene the science and social science faculty to translate the entire body of work represented by the current standards (two years of science; three years of social science) into competency-based equivalencies, or whether we can continue to build on the commission's work in those areas, as well.

Alternative Admission Standards

Both secondary and postsecondary representatives support continuing to allow a portion of students to be admitted under an alternative standard that will enable the public baccalaureate institutions to select a student body with diverse talents and backgrounds. This issue will be addressed in the future work of the committee and brought to the Board at a later time.

LATER PHASES

Assessing and Reporting Standards

Upon Board adoption of competency-based standards, the Admissions Standards Action Committee will develop and recommend an assessment process for identifying students who meet those standards. The prototype will recognize what students know and are able to do regardless of their preparation pathway (academic/applied/vocational). It will also assess levels of student achievement so that competitive colleges can select the highest achieving applicants.

The committee also will work closely with the State Board of Education to develop a standardized reporting form for Washington State public high school students. The reporting form will replace the current statewide uniform transcript at restructured high schools. It will clearly reflect how well students have met the new admissions

standards. The reporting form will be designed to include Certificate of Mastery achievements, classroom assessments, and assessments of curricula completed after the Certificate of Mastery.

This assessment process will be developed with the assistance of outside consultants. Funding for this phase has been requested through the 1997-99 budget process. Should such dedicated funding not be provided in the 1997-99 biennial budget by the Washington Legislature, other options regarding this phase will be developed and a slower implementation can be expected.

Project Evaluation

The admissions standards project will include evaluation of its many components. Embedded within the project are three types of evaluation.

- **Level 1: Student Assessment** will answer the question "How do we assess students' competencies for purposes of college/university admission?"
- **Level 2: Outcomes** will answer the question "How well do students admitted under competency-based standards perform in higher education?"
- **Level 3: Project Success** will answer the question: "How successful has the Admissions Standards Project been?" The response will address a number of process and outcome variables.

NEXT STEPS

Upon completion of the standards, the assessments, and the reporting form, the process will be piloted in three restructured high schools, each of which will be matched with a comparable, but more traditional school. The following year the pilot will be expanded to additional schools, and in the third year of implementation the new standards will be available statewide.

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ADMISSIONS STANDARDS ACTION COMMITTEE ROSTER

Participating Organizations

PTA – Parent
University of Washington – Faculty
Washington Association of School Administration (School Superintendent and Member of the Commission on Student Learning)
State Board of Community and Technical Colleges
Western Washington University – Admissions
Western Washington University – Vice President
State Board of Community and Technical Colleges
State Board of Education
The Evergreen State College – Faculty
Counselor – High School)
School District – Vocational Director
Council of Presidents – Staff
Washington State University – Admissions
Student – Western Washington University
Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board – Staff
Vocational Education and Member of Commission on Student Learning
Eastern Washington University – Vice President
University of Puget Sound – Faculty
School to Work – Staff
Central Washington University – Vice President
Commission on Student Learning – Staff
Pierce Community College – Admissions
Vice Principal – High School
Washington Education Association
The Evergreen State College – Admissions
Counselor – High School
Higher Education Coordinating Board – Staff
Western Washington University – Faculty
Washington Principals' Association
Washington Goals 2000
University of Washington – Admissions